

US to end travel bans for vaccinated passengers

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Currently only US citizens, residents and foreigners with special visas are allowed to enter the United States from most European countries.

The United States announced Monday it will lift COVID travel bans on all air passengers in November if they are fully vaccinated and undergo

testing and contact tracing.

The unprecedented restrictions had kept relatives, friends and business travelers around the world separated for many months as the pandemic grinds on.

Jeffrey Zients, coronavirus response coordinator for President Joe Biden, told reporters the new "consistent approach" would take effect "early November."

The easing of travel restrictions, imposed by Donald Trump 18 months ago as the COVID-19 pandemic first erupted, marks a significant shift by Biden and answers a major demand from European allies at a time of strained diplomatic relations.

Numerous safeguards will remain in place to suppress spread of the virus, which has already killed more than 675,000 Americans and is resurgent after what many had hoped was a lasting dip earlier this year.

"Most importantly, foreign nationals flying to the US will be required to be fully vaccinated," Zients said.

It was not immediately clear if the new rule only applied to US-approved vaccines or if other brands, such as those produced in China or Russia, would also qualify. Zients said that would be determined by the US Centers for Disease Control.

Restrictions on vehicle movement from Canada and Mexico will remain in place.

Zients said passengers will need to show they were fully vaccinated before boarding planes bound for the United States, as well as providing proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken within three days.

Americans not fully vaccinated will still be able to enter, but only on testing negative within a day of travel.



Tourists walk on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame.

Masks will be obligatory on US-bound flights, and airlines will provide the US health authorities with contact tracing information.

"This new international travel system follows the science to keep Americans' international air travel safe," Zients said.

'Great news'

The change means many families and friends can be reunited, sometimes after nearly two years apart.

Phil White, a British entrepreneur living near San Francisco, told AFP his daughter plans to finally visit from London in November.

"As a family we're going to be together for Thanksgiving, which is amazing," he said, adding that he had not seen his daughter for 18 or 19 months.

"That has been very, very, very difficult for us, as everyone can imagine," White said.

And British and German officials quickly welcomed the lifting of the near total ban. The German ambassador to the United States called it "great news."

"Hugely important to promote people-to-people contacts and transatlantic business," Ambassador Emily Haber tweeted.

The announcement was also hailed by airlines, which have taken a huge hit during the pandemic shutdown.



The easing of travel restrictions, imposed by Donald Trump as the Covid-19 pandemic first erupted, marks a significant shift by the United States.

The trade group Airlines For Europe predicted "a much-needed boost to trans-Atlantic traffic & tourism and will reunite families and friends."

While it had been widely expected that Biden would reopen borders to the European Union and Britain, the announcement covers the globe.

"This applies to all international travel," Zients said.

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are allowed to enter the United States from most European countries.

In an interview in Washington with AFP, Thierry Breton, European commissioner for internal market, said he was hopeful the policy will be extended to include the AstraZeneca shot used by many European nations, which has not been approved by US health authorities.

Breton said he spoke with Zients, who "sounded positive and optimistic."

The restriction has deeply irked EU and British authorities. On Monday, the European Union recommended that member states reimpose restrictions on American travelers who had earlier been free to enter if vaccinated.

Breton said the restrictions "no longer made any sense," given Europe's high vaccination rates.

Biden's move comes on the eve of his speech to the annual UN General Assembly in New York, where the pandemic is due to be the headline issue.

It also comes as Washington and Paris spar bitterly over Australia's sudden announcement that it will acquire US-built nuclear submarines as part of a new defense alliance, ditching a previous French contract for conventionally powered submarines.

"This is really driven by the science," a State Department official said, denying the travel decision was an attempt to smooth ruffled French feathers.

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